“Maybe We’ve Caught the Virus of Prophecy”

The Motif of the Prophet in “Angels in America” and “Don’t Ever Wipe Tears without Gloves”

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Tony Kushner's "Angels in America: a Gay Fantasia on National Themes" and Jonas Gardell's "Don't Ever Wipe Tears without Gloves" both make extensive use of biblical motifs in their exploration of the AIDS-crisis in the 1980s and its effect upon the gay male community in New York and Stockholm, respectively.

In this paper I explore the use of *biblical prophecy* and *prophetic identity* in the screen adaptations of the two works ("Angels in America" directed by Mike Nichols and "Don't Ever Wipe Tears without Gloves" by Simon Kaijser, in both cases with screenplays by the original authors).

In their depiction of the AIDS-crisis, both works employ the theme of prophecy to give the besieged gay community voice and agency. Kushner offers two radically different models of "prophetic identity", exploring the potential of each model to articulate the situation of New York's gay community. Both of Kushner's models draw heavily upon on biblical depictions of prophecy, and each casts an AIDS-afflicted gay man in the role of prophet. Similarly, Gardell re-appropriates biblical material, making it address the needs of the gay community in Stockholm during the AIDS-crisis. By adopting in various ways the role of prophet, Gardell's main characters are able to retain control of their life-stories in the midst of a hostile society.

I will discuss the use of prophecy in each work in turn.

1. Angels in America

Angels in America is an ensemble drama, which takes place in New York from 1985 to 1990. The work has two parts, "Millennium Approaches" and "Perestroika." Both parts are sub-divided into three episodes, each of which lasts about an hour in the screen-adapted version. We follow three main story lines: Prior and Louis, who have been in a relationship for four years, are struggling to cope with Prior's recent HIV diagnosis. Finding himself unable to deal with the situation, Louis abandons Prior. Prior starts receiving visions from an angel, who announces to him that he is to be a prophet and carry out a great work. The second storyline centres on a Mormon couple, Joe and Harper Pitt. Joe is a lawyer, a firm believer in God and the Reagan administration, and a closeted homosexual. Aware that something is very wrong with their marriage, and terrified of the larger developments in the world at the threshold of the new millennium, Harper spends much of her time hallucinating—helped by a steady intake of valium. During the course of the film, Joe leaves Harper and begins a relationship with Louis. The third story-line focuses on Roy Cohn, an influential lawyer who was involved in the prosecution during the McCarthy era and who—having committed fraud—is now in danger of losing his legal license. Roy was responsible for the execution of a Jewish woman, Ethel Rosenberg, who was convicted as a spy. As he lies dying with AIDS, she returns from the grave to haunt him.

"Angels in America" has inspired extensive scholarship—including a sustained interest in the play's passionate engagement with religious traditions. In particular, it is Kushner's depiction of modern, Jewish identities, including the intersection between Jewishness and homosexuality, which has appealed to interpreters.[1] However, the central motif of the *prophet* remains

[1] See for example Omer-Sherman and Jonathan Freeedman (monsters and Jews: the idea of the Jew as the perverted other). Scholarship on "Angels in America" has furthermore read the play in the context of the American great awakenings or revivals, argued in favour of a conscious use of the J-source in the Hebrew Bible as this has been presented and interpreted by Harold Bloom (the latter of these: Joshua Pederson)

surprisingly underexplored. It is an image of enormous importance in the play: Kushner uses the figure of the prophet as a vehicle to articulate the identity crisis of the gay community during the AIDS-epidemic. Furthermore, prophetic language is used throughout the play on a more general level too to thematize the state of the affairs in America at the brink of the new millennium. My particular focus here is the way in which Kushner develops the motif of the prophet in conversation with biblical depictions of prophecy.

Central to this theme are Prior's encounters with the heavenly realm and the prophetic task with which he is entrusted. Prior is explicitly identified as a prophet in the third of the play's six parts,[2] but even before reaching this point he has received a number of heavenly visions and communications, commanding him to prepare for a "great work". In language recalling Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1, he is repeatedly told to "prepare the way" for the approaching "messenger."[3] The use of biblical language in passages such as these is apt, as Prior is cast very much in the likeness of a Hebrew Bible prophet.

Rather than drawing primarily from a single biblical source, Kushner weaves his depiction of Prior the prophet from multiple biblical contexts. Furthermore, he also refers to a wealth of related religious material. In this paper, I focus specifically on Kushner's use of the Hebrew Bible, but an exploration of the use of Mormon and New Testament scripture in "Angels in America" would engage the play's construction of prophecy in an interesting manner too.

Some of the echoes in "Angels in America" from the scriptural tradition work together to create an image of a particular type of prophet. Others are played out against each other during the course of the play, as Kushner offers two contrasting visions of what it may mean for Prior, an HIV-infected gay man, to be a prophet. To show how this appropriation of the biblical material works, I am going to take a closer look at a vision which occupies a centre-stage position in Kushner's exploration of Prior's prophetic role—namely the vision in which Prior receives his prophetic calling from an angel. This vision develops the first of Kushner's two prophetic models. The conversation about prophecy in the rest of the play centres very much on the task of articulating an alternative model to the one that the angel offers Prior.

Filmically, Prior's vision of calling is recounted in a playful manner, full of breaks and interpretative interludes.[4] The vision begins at the very end of the play's third part, forming the climax of "Millennium Approaches." It is an unresolved climax, however: the angel arrives and greets Prior, and there the scene ends. The content of her message remains undisclosed for the first twenty-five minutes of "Perestroika" too.[5] Only at this point does Kushner explicitly resume the account of the vision and offer a description of Prior's prophetic task. Even in this resumptive scene, we see the effects of the vision first: Prior has donned prophetic garb, wearing a long black cloak with a hood.[6] He has accepted the reality of the angel's visit, and we hear

[2] Two of his forefathers visit him and herald the arrival oft he angel, and they tell him: "There is good news before there is bad. You are a prophet. Seer. Revelator."

[3] Isaiah 1:3: 'A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD", and Malachi 3:1: 'See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me'. It is worth noting that both of these passages, to which Kushner may be referring, continue ominously in ways which resonate with Angels in America: the Isaiah passage launches into a reflection on mortality and the brevity of human life, while Malachi challenges his audience to reflect on who will be able to stay standing when the Lord appear – "who can endure the day of his coming?"

[4] Dramatically, this is an effective way of emphasizing the importance of this vision.It also sows doubt about the reality and meaning of the vision, a theme which runs throughout the play.

[5] The break is a bit shorter in the play, in which the first scene of „Perestroika" ends with a reprise oft he angel's arrival and her greeting to Prior.

[6] He is limping after his encounter with the angel. Note: Kushner stresses that he should look like an Hebrew Bible prophet. Prior identifies his look as "the wrath of God (…) is the intended effect."

about it as he recounts it to his friend, Belize. The scene cuts back and forth between their conversation and flashbacks to Prior's vision.

The angel's message to Prior—and thus the intended message from the prophet to his community—is that humanity must stop moving. The reason for this command is that human progress and mutability have had disastrous effects upon heaven. According to the angel, God became too fascinated with the unique potential of human beings to change, imagine, and progress. He took to aping them, disappearing from heaven for long periods of time in order to journey to unknown destinations. On the date of the great San Francisco earthquake in 1906, he left heaven entirely, never to return. The angels—abandoned and left to tend heaven alone—have now devised a plan: they believe that if humankind were to turn backwards and stop moving, God would come back.[7]

Large parts of this vision are modelled on the calling missions of Hebrew Bible prophets.[8] There are especially strong echoes from chapter six in the book of Isaiah, in which Isaiah of Jerusalem encounters God in the temple and receives his prophetic calling.[9] The arrival of God makes the temple shake and fills it with smoke. Similarly, in Prior's vision, the arrival of the angel shakes the very foundations of Prior's bedroom, filling it with light, wind, dust, and rubble. Initially, Isaiah is terrified of what he sees. Thus Isaiah 6:5: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Prior responds in a similar manner. He refuses to cooperate: "Whatever you are, I don't understand this visitation, I don't understand what you want from me, I'm not a prophet, I'm a sick lonely man" (Perestrokia, p. 29).

As we shall see, the embodied aspect of prophecy is central to Kushner's exploration of the institution. It is no surprise, then, that he emphasizes and exaggerates the bodily aspects of the biblical calling missions. Already in Isaiah 6 there is a curious degree of physicality, and an almost erotically dangerous intimacy, in the interaction between the heavenly and earthly realms: thus, for example, in verses 6-7, when one of the seraphs touches Isaiah's lips with a piece of coal in order to equip him to deliver his prophetic message. The Angel in Prior's vision goes further still. She fucks him—and I deliberately phrase it like this to emphasize the power dynamics in what is going on here—before pressing the prophetic book against his chest and making its message a part of him:

> "On you in you in your blood we write have written:
> STASIS!
> The END" (Perestroika, p. 30)

Here there are echoes from other calling visions in the Hebrew Bible as well. One point of contact is Ezekiel's inaugural vision where he is commanded to eat a scroll, upon which his

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[7] It is not entirely clear, not even to the angel, what the extent of this standstill must be: "Did you come here to save me or destroy me?" Prior asks her, stating: "You want me dead." And the angel responds:

> "YES! NO! NO!
> *Coughs.*
> This is not in the Text, We *deviate*…
> NO more." (Perestroika, p. 29)

[8] Kushner also plays upon Mormon traditions in this scene: The angel visiting Prior identifies herself as "the American bird, the bald eagle, the continental principality." Like the Mormon ancestor, Joseph Smith, Prior encounters an American angel, and like him he is led by this angel to discover buried writings. Prior's mission is to his community: it is a mission to America, as Joseph Smith's were. Kushner has an ironic take on this Mormon foundation story: the angel's chain of command has failed, and Prior has not been given the implements with which he is meant to dig up his kitchen to find the concealed book of visions. Instead, the angel declares a "revision in the text" and blasts the floor to pieces herself, exposing the buried book.

[9] Note that Kushner refers directly to Isaiah at a later point, namely Perestroika, p. *. (Not in the film.)

prophetic message is written (Ezekiel 3:1-3). Similarly, God touches Jeremiah's lips in his vision of calling to help him speak, despite Jeremiah's protestations that he is too young (Jeremiah 1:6-9).

Kushner thus uses structural elements from the calling visions in the Hebrew Bible to craft Prior's vision. Equally important, however, are the *content parallels* between Prior's mission and the message of prophetic forerunners like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Like Prior, they are entrusted with a message of doom. They are to herald, each in their way, the destruction of their own community.[10] Furthermore, all three prophets carry out symbolic acts, which exemplify their mission. As well as consisting of a message to be preached and spread, their prophetic role is *lived*—it is embodied and it becomes defining for their way of *being* in the world.

So too the prophetic role, which the angel has chosen for Prior: he is to embody his message every bit as much as he is to speak it. His mission is described as a mission of doing: he must undertake "a great work"; namely the work of halting humankind's progress and frenzied lust for life. At the same time, however, Prior's prophetic role is also one of being. His broken body shows the future of humanity, if they continue along the path that they are on. As the angel predicts:

"Before life on Earth becomes finally merely impossible,
It will a long time before have become completely unbearable." (Perestroika, p. 28)

Prior's illness and suffering are part and parcel of his message. This is emphasized even further, as his health declines sharply after he has received his vision of calling.

Let's watch the part of the vision, in which Prior is given the prophetic book and its message is made part of him:

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There is a problem with the angel's plan, however: throughout the rest of the play, Prior refuses to be the angel's prophet. The prophecy, with which he has been entrusted, is breaking him.[11] Prior cannot accept it. The angel warns him against turning down his prophetic calling, referring to Jonah—yet another prophet from the Hebrew Bible whose mission it is to proclaim the doom of a community:

> "You can't Outrun your Occupation, Jonah.
> Hiding from Me one place you will find me in another." (Perestroika, p. 29)

When Joe Pitt's mother, Hannah—who has arrived from Salt Lake City to deal with her son's disintegrating marriage—meets Prior later in the play, she reiterates that warning: she tells him that God has a habit of feeding unwilling prophets to whales (Perestroika, p. 67). However, it is also Hannah who encourages Prior to fight against the angelic message:

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[10] In a perverse gesture, God commands Isaiah to prevent the people from heeding the divine words of warning. Jeremiah is sent to a rebellious people*. On Ezekiel's scroll words of lamentation, mourning and woe are written. Upon eating them, this message becomes part of the prophet.

[11] Stealing his eyesight and his remaining health, which he sees as befitting his prophetic task – note also that seeing with the heavenly glasses required to read the book hurts, ostensibly because of its otherness, but probably also because of the book's message. Like Isaiah he has seen the heavenly realm; he has been given a heavenly message of stasis, doom, and death, and consequently he begins to go blind.

"An angel is just a belief, with wings and arms that can carry you. It is naught to be afraid of. If it lets you down, reject it. Seek for something new." (Perestroika, p. 68)

As the angel returns in, presumably to force Prior to accept the prophecy, Hannah Pitt persuades him to wrestle the angel instead and demand to be released from his task. Following her directions, Prior reenacts Jacob's wrestling with the angel in Genesis 32 and through his reenactment of this struggle he gains access to heaven. In order to enter heaven, Prior must mimick another part of the Jacob narrative and climb up a burning ladder. When he arrives, Prior stands before the angels and refuses to be their prophet. Instead, he speaks in favour of life—even when it is marked by loss and illness.

It is noteworthy that Prior refuses the prophetic role by re-enacting the journey of another biblical role model; Israel's founding father, the patriarch Jacob. Scholars such as Barnett, Nutu, and Lipschitz have emphasized the prominence of the references to the Jacob cycle in "Angels in America". Lipschitz in particular explores the re-*performance* of the Jacob story that Prior undertakes: in performing Jacob's narrative anew, Prior enters into the biblical story. He himself becomes a Jacob-figure. Significantly, the blessing he wrests from the heavens after refusing his mission is the blessing of the patriarchs: the blessing of more life. In the final scene—where Prior is gathered with Louis, Belize, and Hannah Pitt in Central Park—he passes on this heavenly blessing of life not only to his friends, but to the audience too.[12] He promises a better time in America with full citizenship and dignity for all.

When Prior first describes his mission to Belize, the drama in heaven parallels the drama in his own life: as Louis abandoned Prior at the point when his illness has started to change and break him, so too God abandoned a world spinning out of control. "I smell a motif," Belize comments drily (p. 28), refusing to believe that Prior's revelation is real and pointing out the monstrosity of the mission that Prior has been asked to undertake. In contrast, the work which Prior willingly takes upon himself is that of living—and daring to live—with AIDS. Despite his rejection of the heavenly message, Prior *remains* a prophet, but he is now a prophet of a different kind. Instead of being an Isaiah- or Ezekiel-like herald of doom, he becomes a Jacob: a most unlikely ancestral figure.

2. Don't Ever Wipe Tears without Gloves

"Don't Ever Wipe Tears without Gloves" is a Swedish TV-series in three parts, based on an award-winning book trilogy by Jonas Gardell, published in 2012 to 2013.[13] The title refers, first, to an 80s hospital practice not to touch AIDS patients with bare hands, not even to wipe away their tears. Second, it also refers to a passage in the book of Revelation, chapter 20 verse 4, which is quoted repeatedly in the series: "[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." This conflation of religious and societal practice is characteristic of the work as a whole.

In "Don't Ever Wipe Tears", two young men, Rasmus and Benjamin, fall in love. Rasmus arrives in Stockholm in the early eighties after high school, coming from a small town in rural Sweden, and he throws himself head-first into the gay life of the capital. Benjamin grew up Jehovah's Witness, and is deeply conflicted about his sexual identity. When he falls in love

[12] Transformed (Joe's mother) and reconciled (Prior and Louis) It has been pointed out that the reconciliation is not complete here: in Kushner's ideal there is no space for the Reaganite, Joe, who drops out of the story entirely. He is left by Harper too, who journeys to San Francisco (dies?), and has a final vision of rejuvenation and health restored.

[13] In contrast to "Angels in America", "Don't Ever Wipe Tears without Gloves" is still practically unexplored by both film scholars and biblical specialists.

with Rasmus and moves in with him, his parents decide to shun him, pretending that he is already dead. Rasmus and Benjamin belong to a close-knit group of friends, all of them gay men, at the centre of which stands the slightly older Paul. One by one, the group of friends fall ill with HIV, including Rasmus. He is visited only on his deathbed by his parents who inform Benjamin that the funeral will take place in their little town, and that he is not welcome to attend it.

A particularly interesting aspect of "Don't Ever Wipe Tears" is the exploration in the work of the ambiguous potential of the theme of *prophecy*. In "Don't Ever Wipe Tears", the struggle to live openly and with dignity involves prominently the right to use, reimagine and reapply religious material and imagery. Biblical prophetic texts play a particularly important role here.

There is an ongoing tension in the work between the gay men's attempt to maintain their identity, and the efforts in wider society to hide them away. Religious communities participate vigorously in this societal practice of erasure. Consequently, many of the references to biblical prophecy in "Don't Ever Wipe Tears" occur in direct relation to the gay characters' experience of societal, religious, and individual alienation. As part of a wider religious discourse, prophecy can be—and is—employed to erase gay identities.

One example of this is the work's use of Revelation 21:4, which I mentioned above. Benjamin relies heavily on this passage in his missionary work for the Jehovah's Witnesses. He preaches that embracing its prophetic vision will lead to a divine removal of death and sorrow—an expectation which stands in an acute tension with his family's reaction to his coming out. Determined to shun him, Benjamin's family symbolically stage a funeral with cake and flowers, erasing his existence in a brutally direct manner when they come to say goodbye to him.

It is especially in death that the gay men lose control over their identities: at the funeral of one of Benjamin and Rasmus' friends, the priest and the young man's family invent both a new story for his life, presenting him as straight and in an opposite-sex relationship, and a more socially acceptable cause of his death. Similarly, Rasmus' parents remove his body to their hometown after his death, planning a funeral with no references to AIDS or gayness and they deny Benjamin the possibility to remember him and their relationship openly.

At the same time, however, religious language also offers a way of retaining control of one's life-story and of articulating its significance. In direct opposition to a hostile society, gay characters in "Don't Ever Wipe Tears" use biblical, prophetic imagery to maintain their identity. They cast themselves in prophetic roles: their practice towards each other comes to embody scriptural expectations.

So, for example, Benjamin embodies his own prophetic expectations in caring for the dying Rasmus. He offers Rasmus the comfort, which is denied him by his family and by society—and he does so by re-enacting prominent biblical texts of promise. When Rasmus is overcome by terror in the night, afraid of his illness and death, Benjamin physically wrestles with him—suggesting a point of contact with Jacob's nightly wrestle with the angel in Genesis 32. Later, when Rasmus is dying, Benjamin stays by his side in the hospital and wipes away the tears and the goo from his eyes and lips, thus embodying the promises of Revelation 21:4.

Paul undertakes an even more direct re-appropriation of biblical material. To Paul, religious imagery is powerful because it is *kitsch*: it is garish, sentimental, and altogether too much. When meeting Benjamin for the first time, Paul encourages him to show him a picture in the Watchtower magazine of the eschatological vision in Isaiah 11: a family picnicking at an

Alpine-looking lake, while a lion and a lamb sedately look on. “I’ve already bought the whole concept,” he exclaims, “A cult that can produce this level of kitsch! Count me in!”

Religious imagery is fabulous in its too-muchness, and thus eminently applicable to Paul’s vision of gay life in modern-day Stockholm: a life, which must be unapologetic and willing to establish its own rules and traditions. Paul queers potent, religious images, using them to exhort his gay friends to revel openly in their lives and identities-even in the face of illness and death. This is most clearly apparent in his climactic reenactment of the eschatological vision in Isaiah 11 at his funeral. Paul has pre-planned his own funeral, casting himself as the central figure in Isaiah’s vision. The funeral takes the form of a tableau, in which Paul’s coffin becomes the centrepiece of Isaiah’s vision of rejuvenation and new life. Let’s take a look:

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3. Conclusions

The filmic story telling in “Don’t Ever Wipe Tears” has a different character from that in “Angels in America”: the tone is more relentlessly dark and there are no supernatural elements. Nonetheless, the two works share some basic strategies in their use of biblical prophecy to articulate the gay community’s experience during the AIDS crisis. By way of a conclusion, I want to sum up some key elements of these strategies.

Both works use the theme of biblical prophecy subversively in their exploration of the AIDS crisis. Each in their way, they challenge cultural expectations regarding the effect and significance of this crisis for the gay community.

“Don’t Ever Wipe Tears” uses biblical prophecy to disrupt the wider society’s narratives about the gay community during the AIDS crisis. In taking prophetic roles upon themselves, characters like Paul and Benjamin are able to retain control of their life-stories in the midst of a hostile society. They disentangle pieces of religious imagery from its usual contexts and cast themselves in unexpected roles: in caring for his ill boyfriend, Benjamin fulfils the promises of divine comfort from Revelation 21. Paul radically reinterprets Isaiah’s vision of rejuvenation into a quest for maintaining one’s own identity. In Paul’s interpretation, even in death he can be at the centre of the Isaian vision of new life because he has managed to live self-determined, unafraid, and true to his identity.

Kushner has commented in an interview that “although the literature of AIDS has gotten more sophisticated (…) there’s still the expectation that AIDS equals death in the end.” In “Angels in America”, Kushner uses prophecy to challenge this dominant narrative: Prior rejects the prophetic identity which is initially offered to him, refusing to be a herald of stasis and death. Instead, he takes upon himself a radically different prophetic task: the prophetic identity which he chooses himself is one in which life, progress, and blessing dominate.

Thus, both “Angels in America” and “Don’t Ever Wipe Tears without Gloves” employ the theme of prophecy to give the gay community voice and agency. In their depiction of the AIDS-crisis, both works cast gay men who are infected with HIV as prophets: and as prophets, these men retain a significant amount of control over the interpretation of their own life-stories.